

LAW

I. In the Old Testament

Terminology

The OT has a variety of terms for law, the commonest of which are: *tôrāh*, ‘law, instruction, teaching’; *hōq*, ‘statute, decree’; *mišpāt*, ‘judgment, legal decision’; *dābār*, ‘word’; *mišwāh*, ‘command (ment)’. Their number reflects the importance of law within the Bible. Indeed the first five books are called *tôrāh*, ‘law’, by Jews and the NT, even though they appear to be as much about history as law. The specifically legal sections are embedded in narratives about Israel’s early history, and this context is important for the understanding of biblical law. This article will therefore begin by describing the main groups of law within the Pentateuch; next it will review the relationship of OT law to other collections of laws from the ancient Near East; then it will look at the relationship of the law to the covenant, and finally at its relationship to the narratives.

a. The Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments or Ten Words (Decalogue) ([Ex. 20:1–17](#); [Dt. 5:6–21](#)) are rightly regarded as the quintessence of OT law. This is not merely the opinion of modern commentators, but is affirmed by [Jesus](#) and Paul and by the OT itself. They alone are said to have been written by ‘the finger of God’, a very emphatic statement of their inspiration.

The Ten Commandments are not case or statute law, or ‘Israel’s criminal law’ (so Philips). No human penalties are specified for breaking them, but dire warnings of punishment by God or promises of his blessing are added to them. And the last commandment about coveting could never be

enforced by a human court. This shows that the commandments should not be classed as civil or criminal law, but as a statement of basic religious and ethical principles.

These principles are illustrated and in the other legal collections of the Pentateuch are put into a form that judges could handle. [Ex. 22:1–15](#) shows how theft should be punished, and [Dt. 22:13–30](#), among other passages, gives directions about adultery and kindred offences. Indeed the order of topics in [Dt. 12–25](#) seems to be dictated by the order of the commandments.

This order is not haphazard: it gives an insight into the religious and ethical priorities of the OT. Though every commandment expresses the will of God, and to breach them is to invite his punishment, the most important come first. Other collections of law are put in a similar order. Flagrant breaches of the first six commandments are punished by death. Death is made optional for the seventh, i.e. adultery. It is never invoked for ordinary cases of false witness or theft, and covetousness is not brought to court. Thus the Decalogue makes love for God, his name and his day, the Israelite's first duty, but almost as important is love for parents, human life and marriage. Then comes truth and property, and finally covetousness. Other societies tend to rank these matters differently.

b. The Book of the Covenant

[Ex. 20:22–23:19](#) is often referred to as the Book or Code of the Covenant, a title suggested by [Ex. 24:7](#). This was given at the same time as the Ten Commandments, and the context makes it plain that the writer of Exodus saw this collection of laws as an elaboration of the Decalogue. Yet about half of them find good parallels in non-biblical collections of laws, so that scholars assume that there has often been

large-scale borrowing from Canaanite sources or a drawing on common Near-Eastern legal tradition which explains these parallels. But the differences between non-biblical collections and the Book of the Covenant are just as striking as the affinities. There has been no mechanical borrowing, for the laws within the Book have been added to or reordered to reflect biblical priorities. For example, oriental collections of law rarely contain rules about worship or other religious matters, but in the Book of the Covenant and the other collections these come first (20:22–26) and last (23:10–19). In the Mesopotamian collections, laws about slaves usually come towards the end, but Ex. 21:1–11 puts them near the beginning. This reflects the OT's insistence that slaves are human beings, not mere chattels, but it also recalls that as 20:2 puts it, 'I am the lord ... who brought you out ... of slavery.' Israel must show kindness to slaves as God did to them (cf. Dt. 15:15). The primacy of human life over property is also reflected in these laws.

c. Leviticus and the Holiness Code

Source criticism splits the book of Leviticus into two parts: 1–16 is ascribed to the Priestly source and 17–27 to the Holiness Code, an earlier document subsequently incorporated into the Priestly source. The theme of holiness runs through the book of Leviticus. Its motto is: 'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.' The narrative which encases the laws in Leviticus sets their promulgation in Sinai, like the Book of the Covenant. Like the Book of the Covenant, Leviticus shows the same sense of priorities. It begins with seven chapters on sacrifice, showing the acceptable way to worship God. After a short narrative interlude (chs. 8–10), it proceeds with a long section on impediments to worship, i.e. unclean conditions (chs. 11–15), more laws on worship,



before reaching its section on civil and criminal offences (chs. 18–25), with its acme ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ (19:18). Once again, duties towards God precede duties to one’s neighbour.

d. Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is Gk. for ‘second law’. This is not the aptest description of this book, for although chapters 12–25 contain much legal material, the genre of the book as a whole is different from the preceding collections. Deuteronomy is a series of sermons by Moses about the law, urging Israel to keep the law if they want to prosper in the land they are about to enter. Much critical debate focuses on whether Moses, the implied author of Deuteronomy, is the actual author, but that is not the issue here. The laws in Exodus and Leviticus profess to have been given by God to Moses, but Deuteronomy is an extended reflection by Moses on the law and an attempt by him to persuade the nation of Israel to keep the laws, especially when they enter Canaan.

The structure of the book owes much to the Near Eastern legal document form exemplified in treaties, law codes and *kudurru* stones. But as already mentioned the section of Deuteronomy that most closely corresponds to a law code, chapters 12–25, appears to follow the order of the Decalogue in its arrangement of laws. Some of the most obvious points are chs. 12–13//1st commandment ‘no other gods’, chs. 15–16//4th commandment ‘sabbath’ = 7th year and festivals, chs. 17–18//5th commandment ‘parents’ = authorities, chs. 19–21//6th commandment ‘murder’, chs. 22–23//7th commandment ‘adultery’, chs. 23–24//8th commandment ‘theft, property’ ch. 25//9th commandment ‘false witness’. Once again the same sense of values emerges here as in the Decalogue itself.

e. OT law and ancient oriental parallels

In discussing the Book of the Covenant we noted that many parts parallel laws from other Near Eastern texts, such as the laws of Lipit-Ishtar  c. 2100 BC, the laws of Eshnunna and Hammurapi  c. 1750 BC, the Hittite laws and the Middle Assyrian laws. There are also thousands of legal documents dealing with marriage, wills, sale, and disputes spanning nearly three millennia, from Sumer to Egypt, which shed light on Israelite legal practice. Despite the multitude of documents now available, it is difficult to know how much legal practice differed from place to place and in different periods. Though scholars tend to presuppose much evolutionary development, Westbrook argues that the ancient world was a very static society, with relatively little change happening from place to place. Certainly legal texts from very different times and places have contributed to elucidating biblical law.

It is generally agreed that the extrabiblical collections of law are not comprehensive codes trying to cover every legal eventuality. Often the most obvious cases are not discussed, *e.g.* ordinary homicide or arson, but unusual cases are, *e.g.* looting at a fire. This suggests we are dealing with collections of traditional case law, perhaps introducing certain innovations or reforms. How far these collections were drawn up for the guidance of judges (they are hardly ever cited in legal cases), or how far they represent an academic exercise by learned scribes as propaganda on behalf of the king, is still a matter of debate. The biblical collections are similar in not being comprehensive and in presupposing at many points the normal legal practices of the Near East. For example, [Lv. 18](#) does not prohibit incest with one's daugh-

ter, but presupposing it extends the incest boundaries considerably. The OT does not describe what constituted a legal marriage or divorce, but by using extrabiblical materials, and remarks in biblical law about unusual cases, it is possible to reconstruct more typical procedures. So with the aid of Near Eastern texts, biblical law may be interpreted much more exactly.

However, though legal practice in Israel may at many points have been similar to that of its neighbours, the framework of understanding was somewhat different. In Mesopotamia, the king was the author of the law, but Israel saw God as the lawgiver. This had profound consequences. First, it meant that all offences were sins. They did not merely affect human relationships, but also the relationship between God and people. Non-observance of the law was a breach of the covenant between God and Israel that was liable to provoke divine judgment. Second, if law comes from God, all life is related to God, therefore it is natural for collections of law to contain reference to religious duties as well as social ones. We have already noted this feature in all the biblical collections of law. Third, the duty of keeping the law fell on every Israelite, not just the king. So every Israelite was expected to know and teach the law, especially to members of his family (cf. [Dt. 6:7](#)).

The express purpose of the law was to create a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation' ([Ex. 19:6](#)). But the prologue of Hammurapi's laws dwells on the political and economic benefits that law brings—justice, peace, prosperity and good government. But though the OT recognizes these benefits as flowing from national obedience to the law (cf. [Dt. 28:1–14](#)), it also sees a much greater benefit in the law.

The law itself is the divine means of creating a holy people. Obedience to the law renews the divine image in man, enabling him to fulfil the command to 'Be holy, for I am holy' and to enjoy the presence of God in the midst of his people (cf. [Lv. 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7; 26](#)). 🦋

f. Biblical law and the Covenant

All the biblical collections of law are set within a covenant framework. The Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant form the centrepiece of the first Sinai covenant, the laws in Leviticus form part of the renewal of that covenant after the golden calf incident, and Deuteronomy renews the covenant some 40 years later in the plains of Moab. It is widely recognized that the Israelite covenant roughly follows the pattern of Near Eastern vassal treaties made between great kings and their underlings. In the OT setting, the Lord is the great king and Israel is his vassal, pledged to total loyalty.

The covenant framework of the law has several implications for its understanding. First, it shows that the law forms part of a personal relationship between God and Israel: they are not anonymous rules imposed by an unknown authority. They are given by the creator God who has chosen one nation out of all the nations to be his treasured possession ([Ex. 19:5](#)) 🦋 and his laws are a gift to them that no other people enjoy and proof of God's nearness to them ([Dt. 4:7–8](#) 🦋). Second, the law was given to Israel after she had experienced salvation, after they had been brought out of Egypt, not before. Israel was saved by divine mercy, not by their own good works or efforts. The giving of the law was part of God's ongoing grace towards Israel. Third, obedience to the law would lead to yet greater blessings for

the nation : good harvests, numerous children, freedom from hunger and disease, victory over their enemies, and God's presence in their land. But, conversely, breaking the laws would lead to all sorts of disasters: drought, hunger, disease and, ultimately, expulsion from the land ([Lv. 26](#); [Dt. 28](#)). So though obedience to the law did not earn Israel salvation, it was indispensable if they were to continue to enjoy its benefits.

g. The law in its narrative context

The law-giving at Sinai is not an isolated event. As explained above, it was part of the covenant made there, and this in turn is viewed as fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ([Ex. 3:7–17](#); [6:2–8](#)). God promised to make Abraham a great nation, give his descendants the land of Canaan and make an everlasting covenant with them (cf. [Gn. 12:1–3](#); [17](#)). The Sinai covenant was a partial fulfilment of these patriarchal promises.

But the Sinai covenant does not simply hark back to these promises to Abraham. It reflects God's plan for mankind foreshadowed in [Genesis 1–2](#). There God gave Adam the garden of Eden. He told him to 'be fruitful and multiply' and provided him with a wife, walked with them in the garden, and gave them a law 'not to eat of the tree'. It was transgression of this one law that led to Adam and Eve forfeiting the benefits of Eden. The story of the rest of Genesis is of God's planning and working to bring to pass his original plan for the human race. The call of Abraham was a first step, the covenant at Sinai was another. Not only did the Lord come down on Sinai but he guided them with the pillar of fire, and eventually 'walked' in the tabernacle as he once walked in Eden. Admittedly, it was only the high priest who could enter the divine presence, whereas in Eden the

whole human race enjoyed such intimacy with God. But it was a step in the right direction.

Similarly, the laws given at Sinai, particularly the penal laws and those formulated negatively, e.g. most of the Ten Commandments, should not be regarded as God's ideals for human behaviour. Rather they represent the floor below which no one should fall —if they do, society or God must step in to punish. God's ideals are set out in the opening chapters of Genesis, where man is created in God's image and therefore expected to imitate him. In the exhortations and motive clauses scattered throughout the collections, similar lofty goals emerge: 'Be holy, for I am holy', 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.' Therefore the OT law fixes no ceiling on human ethical endeavour: it too encourages man to 'be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt. 5:48).

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II. In the New Testament

a. Jewish background

One of the most important features of OT religion was the law of Moses, which the Jews received when the Sinai

covenant was ratified. Obedience to the law of Moses was not conceived as a way of earning God's favour but as a response to his grace in delivering Israel from Egypt ([Ex. 20:1–17](#)). Nonetheless, the basic storyline of the OT reveals that Israel failed to keep the law and forsook the God of Israel. Yahweh responded by sending his people into exile for their disobedience of the Torah ([Lv. 26](#); [Dt. 28](#); [Jos. 23:14–16](#); [2 Ki 17:7–23](#); [Dn. 9](#)). In Paul's day the Jews believed that the promises of a glorious, national future were not yet fulfilled, since they were in subjection to Rome, and their servility continued to be ascribed to their failure to obey the Torah. The keeping of the law of Moses, therefore, was considered to be essential for the deliverance of the nation and the fulfilment of God's promises. Most Jews in Second Temple Judaism believed that by exercising their free will they had the ability to keep the law ([Ecclus. 15:11–22](#); [Psalms of Solomon 9:4–5](#); [2 Apocalypse of Baruch 54:15, 19](#); [85:7](#); ['Aboth 3:16](#)). What was required was commitment to carry out its prescriptions.

b. The meaning of the term 'law' and 'works of law' in the NT

Given the OT background, it is not surprising that the term 'law' (nomos) in the NT usually refers to the law of Moses. In most cases the focus is on Sinaitic legislation, i.e. the commands and prescriptions of the law (e.g. [Lk. 2:22–24, 27, 39](#); [Rom. 2:12–27](#); [1 Cor. 9:8–9](#)). The phrase 'the law and the prophets' also occurs (e.g. [Mt. 5:17](#); [7:12](#); [22:40](#); [Lk. 16:16](#); [Jn. 1:45](#); [Acts 13:15](#); [Rom. 3:21](#); cf [Lk. 24:44](#)), denoting the OT scriptures as a whole. 'Law' in these cases refers to the Pentateuch, while 'prophets' designates the rest of the OT. The term 'law' also occasionally refers to the OT as Scripture and yet does not denote the Pentateuch, for Paul cites pas-

sages from Psalms, Proverbs and Isaiah and labels them as ‘law’ (cf. [Rom. 3:10–19](#); [1 Cor. 14:21](#)). There are a few other instances in which the term ‘law’ may not refer to the law of Moses. The ‘law of Christ’ ([Gal. 6:2](#); cf. [1 Cor. 9:21](#)) is understood by most scholars to be distinct from the law of Moses, although some see it as the fulfilment of the Mosaic law. It has often been said that the word ‘law’ means ‘principle’, ‘order’, or ‘rule’ in [Rom. 3:27](#); [7:21](#), [23](#) and [8:2](#), although this has been vigorously contested in recent scholarship, with some insisting that the reference is to the law of Moses in every case.

The meaning of the term ‘works of law’ (*erga nomou*), which occurs eight times in Paul ([Gal. 2:16](#) [three times]; [3:2](#), [5](#), [10](#); [Rom. 3:20](#), [28](#)), has also been the subject of considerable controversy. It has been suggested that the term is shorthand for legalism (Fuller), or that it focuses on the requirements which separate and distinguish Jews from Gentiles, viz., circumcision, food laws, and observance of days (Dunn). More likely, the term refers broadly to all the works or deeds required by the law (Westerholm). This latter view is suggested by the Qumran literature (*Florilegium* 1:7; *Miqsat Ma’aseh Torah*) where the term ‘works of the law’ denotes all that is required by the law. Even more germane is the context in which the term is found in Romans. Paul asserts in [Rom. 3:20](#) that no one is right before God by ‘works of law’. This statement functions as a conclusion to the sustained argument of [Rom. 1:18–3:18](#), where it is demonstrated that all people—both Jews and Gentiles—have sinned and fallen short of God’s standard. Indeed, the Jews are indicted in [Rom. 2:17–19](#) for failing to keep the law which they so avidly proclaim. The fundamental argument against the Jews in [Rom. 2](#) is not that they are legalistic, nor that they exclude Gentiles. Rather, they are

criticized for failing to observe the law which they treasure and teach. Thus, when Paul concludes his case in [Rom. 3:20](#) by saying that no one is right before God by ‘works of law’, it follows from the preceding argument that the law, as a whole, is contemplated and that human beings failed to keep it perfectly. It is likely that a similar understanding should be applied in [Gal. 2:16](#) and [3:10](#). A reference to the whole law is suggested particularly by [Gal. 3:10](#), for Paul says that a curse rests upon those who do not ‘abide by *all* that is written in the book of the law’. The emphasis on ‘all’ (Paul uses the [LXX](#) text which contains the word ‘all’, not the MT where the word is lacking) intimates that the whole law is in view and that perfect obedience is demanded. If ‘works of law’ do not justify, then what is the means by which the curse of the law can be removed? [Gal. 3:13](#) proclaims that the curse is removed through the cross of Christ by which he becomes a curse-bearer for believers. [Rom. 3:21–26](#) contains a similar argument: righteousness does not come via the law, but is available through faith by virtue of the atoning death of Christ which turned away the Father’s wrath and wiped away our sins.

c. The law and human inability

We have seen that in both the OT and Second Temple Judaism, Israel’s failure to realize the promises of national glory was ascribed to disobedience to the Torah. Paul ([Rom. 1:18–3:20](#)) also indicts both Gentiles and Jews for their failure to observe the law (cf. [Gal. 2:17–18](#); [3:10](#); [5:3](#); [6:13](#)). Other NT writers concur that disobedience was the fundamental problem with the Jews (cf. [Mt. 3:7–10](#) par.; [Jn. 7:19](#); [Acts 7:53](#); [15:10–11](#)). Indeed, Jesus’ most stinging criticism of the Pharisees is not that they are legalistic, but that they themselves do not keep the law (cf. [Mt. 5:20](#); [23:3](#), [23](#),

25–26; Mk. 7:8, 13; Lk. 11:37–52).

NT writers do not depart from Second Temple Judaism in their conception that the promises have not yet been realized because of human sin. This would have been common ground between NT writers and their Jewish contemporaries. NT writers differed in their assertion that human beings are *unable* to keep the law (see Laato's work below). Paul is particularly emphatic on this point. He says that those who are in the flesh, *i.e.* unregenerate, 'cannot' keep God's law (Rom. 8:7). They are slaves to sin (Rom. 6:6, 17, 19, 20) and sold under the power of sin (Rom. 7:14) so that they are its captives (Rom. 7:23). Many Jews believed that the law could counter the 'evil impulse' (*yēser hāro*) in human beings. Paul countered that to be 'under law' was to be under the power of sin (Rom. 6:14–15; 7:14; Gal. 3:22). Those who are of 'works of law' are 'under a curse' (Gal. 3:10). They are enslaved to the elements of the world (Gal. 4:3–5), and can be freed from the tyranny of being 'under law' only when they yield to the leading of the Spirit (Gal. 5:18). This is not to say that the law is evil *per se* (Rom. 7:12), for the 'under' phrases denote an era of salvation history in which the law was given and yet the Spirit was withheld from most of Israel. Thus, the law of Moses was given to increase sin (Rom. 5:20; 7:7–11; Gal. 3:19), and the law apart from the Spirit kills and condemns (2 Cor. 3:6, 9), for 'the power of sin is the law' (1 Cor. 15:56).

d. Is Jewish legalism criticized in the NT?

Ever since the Reformation, scholars have understood NT writers, and Paul in particular, to be opposing Jewish legalism which taught that one could merit right standing before God by doing the works of the law. A few dissenting voices have been raised along the way, but the consensus

basically held until 1977. The year 1977 marks a watershed in NT studies, for E. P. Sanders published in that year his massive and influential work *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Sanders contends that scholarship has read Paul and Second Temple Judaism through the lenses of the Reformation struggle between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism instead of from a historical perspective. When the extant literary evidence of Judaism is examined, he claims, no evidence of legalism can be supported from the Jewish texts themselves—with the exception of 4 Ezra. Thus, the idea that Judaism was legalistic is a serious misreading of the evidence.

Sanders has convinced many scholars of the validity of his case, and he rightly strikes a balance against a caricature of Second Temple Judaism. Nonetheless, the claim that Judaism was as free of legalism as he suggests is questionable. The failure of Second Temple Judaism to emphasize the covenant and the stress on the minutiae of the law are at least a recipe for legalism which could easily creep into the practice, if not the theology, of some Jews. Neither can NT evidence that points to legalism among the Jews be explained away. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk. 18:9–14) demonstrates that the Pharisee believed he was righteous because of his morality and devotion to religious practices. His religion had become a mask for self-exaltation (v. 14). The Lukan inclusion of this parable can scarcely be accounted for if no one suffered from the problem of legalism.

Several texts in Paul also take aim at merit theology. For instance, Paul explicitly contrasts someone who works for a wage that is owed to him with someone who receives the gift of justification simply by believing (Rom. 4:4–5). This illustration occurs in a context in which all boasting is

excluded, since righteousness is obtained by faith instead of works ([Rom. 3:27–28](#); [4:2–3](#)). One must strain the text unduly not to see a critique of [legalism](#) here. Those who are convinced that they have done the requisite works (an illusion, of course, since no one keeps the law perfectly—[Rom. 1:18–3:20](#)) do not need righteousness as a gift. They believe they have merited righteousness as a wage that is deserved, since they worked to attain it. And thus they believe (vainly!) they have grounds for boasting in their achievement. [Rom. 9:30–10:8](#) should be understood similarly. The problem with the Jews is that they did not pursue the law with faith ‘but as from works’ ([Rom. 9:32](#)). Instead of submitting themselves to God’s saving righteousness, they tried to establish their own righteousness by works ([Rom. 10:3](#)). The assertion by some (e.g. Dunn) that Paul’s criticism of the Jews is limited to their nationalism and ethnocentrism can hardly be sustained here. Not a word is breathed in this context about circumcision, food laws, or observance of days. The text refers to ‘works’ in general not even ‘works of law’—and thus it would be illegitimate to conclude that the Jews are criticized for excluding Gentiles. The term ‘works’ should be interpreted in a broad sense, denoting their works-orientation rather than faith-orientation. Paul’s critique of the Jews was not from an outsider’s perspective, for he had suffered from the same tendency ([Phil. 3:2–11](#)). He attempted to obtain right-standing with God on the basis of ‘his own righteousness from the law’ instead of ‘the righteousness of God on the basis of faith’ ([Phil. 3:9](#)). The critique against [legalism](#) in the NT should not be understood as an attack against ‘Jews’ and an indication of [anti-Semitism](#). [Legalism](#) is due to pride, and the desire for self-exaltation, which is a problem common to *all* humanity, not just the Jews.

e. Abrogation and fulfilment of the law

One of the perplexities in reading the NT is that it seems to say contradictory things about the law. In fact, Raisanen makes this his central plank in his book on Paul's view of the law, contending that Paul's theology of the law is inconsistent and contradictory. Raisanen's solution is unsatisfactory, and yet the difficulty is apparent to all careful readers of the NT, since the various statements made about the law are difficult to reconcile. This comes to the forefront in the matter of the abrogation and fulfilment of the law. Some statements imply that the law is still in force and fulfilled in Christ, while others teach that the law has come to an end. The solution to this vexing problem is paradoxical, for NT writers affirm that both are true, *i.e.* the law is abrogated and yet it is also fulfilled.

Matthew, for instance, emphasizes that Christ came to fulfil the law (5:17–20; cf. 5:21–48). What Matthew means by 'fulfil' is the subject of controversy, but it should be related to his christology, since he emphasizes that Christ fulfils OT prophecy (cf. 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17, etc.). Matthew hints (15:1–20) that the food laws of the OT are no longer binding. Mark, in the parallel text (Mk. 7:1–23), makes it explicit that all foods are now clean (Mk. 7:19). It is also possible that Matthew's words about the Sabbath suggest some change regarding Sabbath regulations (12:1–14). The fulfilment envisaged by Matthew, then, hints at some changes in the law. Food laws and perhaps the Sabbath laws are no longer binding in the same way (cf. also the texts on divorce in 5:31–32; 19:3–12). Nonetheless, the moral norms of the law are not jettisoned, but can now become a reality with the coming of the kingdom (4:17; 5:17–48).

Luke also emphasizes that Jesus fulfils prophecy

(1:32–33, 54–55, 68–79; 4:18–19; 24:25–27, 44–49; Acts 2:16–36, etc.), and that the law is eternally valid (16:17). This does not mean that there is no shift in terms of the law, for Acts 10:1–11:18 communicates in unmistakable terms that food laws are no longer required. Moreover, at the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, circumcision is not imposed on the Gentiles. Luke’s perspective seems to be a salvation historical one in which the law no longer functions in the same way now that Messiah has come, the Spirit has been poured out, and the gospel goes to the Gentiles (cf. Blomberg). The letter to the Hebrews depicts the covenantal shift in a beautiful argument which is unfolded in chapters 7–10. The law of the old covenant is no longer binding, since there has been a change of priesthood (Heb. 7:11–12). Indeed, the very fact that a Melchizedean priesthood was predicted in Ps. 110:4 signals that the Levitical priesthood was destined to become obsolete. If the Levitical priesthood has been superseded, the same is true of Levitical sacrifices. Ultimately, the blood of animals cannot atone for sin anyway, since they are brute beasts and unwilling victims. OT sacrifices actually anticipated and pointed forward to the sacrifice of Christ which is the fulfilment of what they adumbrated. Thus, the author of Hebrews does not criticize the OT law *per se*. He places it in salvation historical perspective, arguing that it must be interpreted in light of the fulfilment accomplished by Jesus Christ. The OT itself, in promising a new covenant, envisaged a day when the old would be dissolved.

Paul’s theology follows the same basic paradigm. The gospel of Christ fulfils the OT scriptures (Rom. 1:2; 3:21). And now that Christ has come, circumcision, food laws and observance of days are not mandated for the people of God (Rom. 2:26–29; 4:9–12; 14:1–23; 1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 4:10; 2:3–5;

5:2–6; 6:12–13; Col. 2:16–23). The Mosaic covenant has come to an end upon the arrival of Christ (Gal. 3:15–4:7; 2 Cor. 3:4–18), for the promises given to Abraham that all nations would be blessed have become a reality (Gal. 3:6–9, 14–18, 29; Rom. 4:9–17). Circumcision, food laws and Sabbath are not required, because the days of separation between Jews and Gentiles have ended. And yet the deeper reality to which these laws pointed has now been fulfilled. Circumcision of the heart has become a reality through the work of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 2:28–29; Phil. 3:3) and the work of Christ on the cross (Col. 2:11–12). The purity laws of the OT are fulfilled in purity of life and in separation from all evil (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14; 7:1; cf. Peter’s application of Lv. 11:44 in 1 Pet. 1:15–16). Paul himself does not enunciate how the Sabbath is fulfilled, but the author of Hebrews (Heb. 4:1–11) sees the Sabbath as coming to fruition in the Sabbath rest which believers now enjoy, and which will be consummated at the day of Christ’s return. The fulfilment of the law for Paul (cf. also Jas. 2:8–12) also involves empowerment so that the moral norms of the law may be kept. Many scholars doubt that Paul operated with a distinction between the moral and ceremonial law, but texts such as Rom. 2:25–29; 8:4; 13:8–10; Gal. 5:2–6, 14; 1 Cor. 7:19, suggest that he operated with such a distinction. Of course, Paul never conceived that the law could be fulfilled in one’s own strength. Fulfilling the law was due to the work of the Holy Spirit which enabled believers to obey God’s commandments.

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